

Principles and recommendations regarding learning outcomes in accreditation procedures

Introduction

One of the main goals of the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) is to develop common principles for accreditation organizations to enhance the mutual recognition of their accreditation decisions¹.

To achieve this goal the members of ECA signed the Code of good practice, as a general framework of this consortium.

We are currently witnessing dynamic developments towards the construction of a EHEA, being the definition of learning outcomes (LO) and their assessment key aspects of the latest developments.

In Europe, learning outcomes are defined as statements² of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a period of learning³.

ECA commenced its work for the integration of learning outcomes in quality assurance procedures in 2006, carrying out two surveys among its members. One finding of this work was that ECA members agree that learning outcomes can be taken into account during any assessment procedure in higher education, at programme or institutional level, and that this enhances the student-centred approach. They also agree upon the fact that taking into account learning outcomes in accreditation procedures by means of commonly developed principles contributes to the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.

In order to increase mutual trust and transparency for recognition purposes, as well as to further develop and improve external quality assurance procedures, the members of ECA concurred that assessment procedures should take into account shared principles for an outcome-oriented quality assurance approach, which resulted in the following document. Rather than regulatory prescriptive requirements, the recommendations provided in this document should be considered as explanatory notes or examples of good practice.

These principles and recommendations integrate themselves into the dynamics of the Bologna process and reflect the will of European Ministers to further develop the European dimension of quality assurance, increasing transparency and recognition in the EHEA.

Accreditation organizations reaffirm that HEI are responsible for the quality assurance of their study programmes, which involves the definition of provisions for the assessment of LO. Nevertheless, accreditation organisations aim at contributing to the further development and improvement in the use of LO, and thus to the greater effectiveness of LO assessment as an integral part of students' learning processes.

For this purpose, ECA members adopt these principles and recommendations which aim at providing a source of assistance and guidance to accreditation organizations undertaking external quality assurance.

¹ Accreditation organizations refer to external quality assurance agencies that perform assessments for accreditation and quality enhancement purposes.

² *A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*, Bologna Working Group on Qualifications, p 29.

³ For the purpose of this document *Period of learning* refers to *programme* (AP degree, Bachelor and Master).

Principles and recommendations regarding learning outcomes in accreditation procedures

Principle 1: Accreditation organisations should take into account LO in their assessments, thus enhancing Mutual Recognition of accreditation decisions.

Recommendations:

- A. Accreditation organisations include quality standards and criteria relating to LO in their assessment of higher education programmes and institutions.
- B. Accreditation organisations assure that their LO-related standards and criteria are applied consistently and that experts are trained accordingly.
- C. Accreditation organisations assure that the intended LO of a programme are available to the review team at the start of a QA procedure.

Principle 2: Accreditation organisations should assess whether the LO are in line with the National Qualifications Framework and/or the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area.

Recommendations:

- A. Accreditation organisations assess whether the intended LO satisfy national and/or international requirements with respect to the relevant level and possibly subject/discipline. These requirements may refer to the National Qualifications Framework, to the overarching Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area, to the academic community and/or to the professional field.
- B. Accreditation organisations assess whether an awarded qualification is at the stated level in the stated discipline and they evaluate how the institution monitors it.

Principle 3: LO are a shared concern of stakeholders and thus accreditation organisations should assess whether the higher education institutions consider relevant stakeholder opinions regarding LO when designing or revising programmes.

Recommendations:

- A. Accreditation organisations consider whether programmes and/or institutions have clearly identified both their internal and external stakeholders.
- B. Accreditation organisations assess whether both internal and external stakeholders actively participate to the process of designing and revising the programme's LO by participating, for instance, to meetings, pedagogical boards, satisfaction surveys, evaluation procedures.

Principle 4: Accreditation organisations should assess whether LO and the way they are assessed higher education institutions are understandable and public.

Recommendations:

- A. Accreditation organisations assess whether the LO and the way they are assessed are published conveniently and easily accessible to the relevant stakeholders.
- B. Accreditation organisations assess whether LO descriptions and the assessment methods are understandable. Therefore accreditation organisations could pay particular attention to aspects such as:
 - whether LO are written in concrete and clear terms (simple and short sentences),
 - whether LO focus on what students are expected to be able to demonstrate and describe observable abilities which can be assessed,
 - whether LO assessment methods are written in concrete and clear terms and are results-oriented.

Principle 5: Accreditation organisations should assess whether curriculum design and content enable students to achieve the intended LO and whether higher education institutions apply proper procedures to assess those intended LO.

Recommendations

- A. Accreditation organisations assess whether the educational aims and objectives are adequately transformed into intended LO.
- B. Accreditation organisations analyse whether the teaching & learning activities enable students to reach the intended programme LO.
- C. Accreditation organisations evaluate whether the assessment methods applied by the HEI are appropriate to measure the achievement of the intended LO. They check whether there is alignment between LO, teaching & learning activities and assessment methods.
- D. Accreditation organisations assess whether the internal quality assurance measures of the programme include mechanisms to ascertain the achievement of the intended LO.

Principle 6: In the case of programme accreditation, accreditation organisations should make explicit reference to the programme's LO in their reports.

Recommendations:

- A. Accreditation organisations include the assessed programme's LO in their reports. Reference is made to the LO that are valid for the programme at the time of the accreditation.

Principle 7: In the case of institutional accreditation, accreditation organisations should evaluate the institution's provisions regarding the implementation and assessment of LO.

Recommendations:

- A. Accreditation organisations assess whether the implementation and assessment of LO is based on a carefully tailored strategy at the institutional level.
- B. Accreditation organisations evaluate whether HEI provide adequate support for the development and assessment of LO, for instance:
 - establishment of staff trainings and workshops on writing and assessing LO,
 - provision of user-friendly documentations and good practices for teaching staff, students and external stakeholders,
 - 'mechanisms' to encourage staff to engage in LO implementation and assessment.
- C. Accreditation organisations assess whether the internal quality assurance system of HEI includes provisions for the implementation and assessment of LO as well as mechanisms to ascertain the achievement of the intended LO.